

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 5:1-12:14 (12:1-14); Psalm 149; Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14.

Exodus 5:1-12:14 (12:1-14) is the conclusion of the most exciting story found in scripture – the story of Israel’s liberation from Egyptian slavery (the actual reading for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time is Exodus 12:1-14).

“Moses and Aaron assembled all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron spoke all the words that Yahweh had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. The people believed; and when they heard that Yahweh had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped” (Exod. 4:29-31). Thus, the drama for Israel’s liberation had begun.

A few weeks later, Moses found himself standing before the man to whom Moses had once been a “brother” and with whom he had played as a lad. And now that brother was the Pharaoh of Egypt, the most powerful ruler in the world! Think how delighted the Pharaoh must have been to have his childhood companion standing before him. But then his childhood companion opened his mouth. And what he said was not the welcoming greeting the Pharaoh expected to hear.

“Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh, “Thus says Yahweh, God of Israel. ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness’”. But Pharaoh said, “Who is this Yahweh, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know this Yahweh, and I will not let Israel go”.” (5:1)

The gauntlet was thrown down and the battle for supremacy had begun.

This battle between the leader of the world’s most powerful nation and the leader of his slaves was a far more significant battle than an initial reading of the account would suggest. This was a battle on three levels. It was a battle of the wills of Pharaoh and Moses, a perfect sibling rivalry. It was a classic battle between the forces of oppression and the forces of liberation, of dominating power and of relational power. And it was a battle between gods – a truly authentic spiritual warfare. Let’s examine all three.

It was a battle between brothers. This reality is often overlooked, but it really can’t be ignored here. This was the classic sibling rivalry. Both had grown up as brothers – one the legitimate heir of the former pharaoh and of the pharaoh’s throne, the other the adopted brother of the heir’s sister. They had played together, competed together, studied together, trained together to give leadership to Egypt. The one, of course, would be the next pharaoh. But the other was groomed to become a significant leader of Egypt; tradition holds that Moses was trained to be the commanding general of the Egyptian army and had already won some impressive military victories, even as a young man. His fall from grace must have been devastating to the pharaoh then in power and to his brother who had learned to depend upon him as a strategic advisor once he became pharaoh. Now he whom all had assumed was dead had returned to the court. But he returned as a rival, making an impossible demand of his brother king.

Let the Hebrew slaves go? Moses must be mad! Would the Pharaoh of Egypt so lightly and irresponsibly destroy his kingdom's economic base and political power to please his long-lost brother? The Pharaoh, of course, would have refused to accede to Moses' confrontation of him. But then Moses acted in order to demonstrate to his brother the kind of power he had been given by this strange god Yahweh, a power that could make life difficult enough in Egypt that it would be in the Egyptian's and Pharaoh's best interests to release the Israelites from their bondage. And so the battle was drawn between two brothers, a battle that would have to leave one of them in defeat!

The struggle between Pharaoh and Moses thus escalated quickly into a far more important struggle. It was a battle between the respective power organizations that each represented – Pharaoh providing the leadership of the mammoth tyranny of Egypt and Moses leading Egypt's slave population that would defy the will of its masters.

When Pharaoh initially refused to grant Moses' demand to release Israel, Moses used the magical tricks which God had given him (Exodus 3-4). But the Egyptian priests proved themselves capable of magic as well, and Pharaoh kept the Israelites in bondage.

Instructed by Yahweh, Moses then proclaimed to Pharaoh that terrible plagues would fall upon Egypt if the Israelites were not released. Pharaoh refused to yield. Inevitably, the plagues came. First, the Nile River, Egypt's source of life, was turned into blood and polluted. But Pharaoh refused to comply. Then God struck Egypt with a plague of frogs, overrunning the country. Pharaoh appeared to capitulate, declaring that Israel could go if the plague stopped. But soon after its cessation, Pharaoh reneged on his promise. Suddenly, Egypt was struck by a plague of gnats and flies. Again Pharaoh recanted, and again, after the plagues had been removed, he reneged.

Moses appeared before Pharaoh once more and confronted him with the threat of three new plagues, plagues which would come upon Egypt but which would not touch the Israelite encampments. The plagues came – plagues of murrain of cattle, boils, and hail. In fear, Pharaoh begged for mercy, admitted his hardness of heart, and indicated a willingness to free the Israelites. But again, when the plagues had been lifted, Pharaoh refused to free his slaves. As a result, two more plagues came upon the Egyptians. A plague of locusts attacked Egypt, destroying the year's crops and forcing Egypt to face starvation. This was followed by three days of heavy darkness. Still Pharaoh refused to yield.

When one examines the struggle over the plagues from a strategic perspective, one can immediately see that this was a classic power engagement between Pharaoh and Moses. Let's examine this story from that perspective.

First, when working for liberation or justice for themselves, the chief objective for people without power is to demonstrate their power in such a way that they will be taken seriously by the political, economic and religious controllers of power. The purpose of a demonstration of the people's capacity to use their power is to convince the Powers that Be to enter into good faith negotiations with those who are disrupting the status quo out of their own enlightened self-interest. Thus, the plagues demonstrated to Pharaoh the capacity of Moses and of Moses God so

that it would be clearly demonstrated that it would be in Pharaoh's self interest to take Moses seriously. Pharaoh finally came to the place of taking the threat seriously, but he was not willing to enter into good faith negotiations. Instead, he consistently reneged on his negotiated position (to let the people go free) when the threat was removed. What, then, should Moses do?

Unless confronted to change, users of economic, political and religious power (i.e., Pharaoh) will exercise power unilaterally and despotically. Such exercise of power will be backed up by laws of the state that Pharaoh created, force exercised through military intervention, and by economic pressures and religious beliefs that were created by those holding unilateral power to maintain themselves and their heirs in power. The only kind of power that can oppose unilateral power without creating warfare, oppression or violent revolution is relational power – the power of the people that is built upon the mutual trust they have in each other. In the story of Moses' confrontation of Pharaoh, one of the most remarkable realities of that action was how the people remained steadfast behind Moses. There was indication of very real debate and differences of opinion regarding the actions against the Egyptians, and that debate occurred when the Israelites were with each other (5:10-6:13). But to Pharaoh, they presented a united front that Pharaoh and his minions were unable to crack! That, in turn, increased pressure upon Pharaoh to accede to Moses' demands.

All good organizing is always reorganizing. That is, the world is already clearly organized by those in power for their own advantage (as was Egypt under Pharaoh). The organizing task of Moses through the trust relationship with Israel he had built was to reorganize the way power was being exercised in this situation. The only way such reorganizing could be accomplished would be through "actions" by those demanding a re-adjustment in the distribution of power upon those clinging to unilateral power. That is exactly what the plagues were designed to do. Each plague both frightened Pharaoh and his court because the Egyptians were forced into "disorganization" (that is, they didn't know how to combat the plagues and thus had to recognize that they were not in control of the situation but, instead, radically out of control). And they forced the Pharaoh to change his actions; they "re-organized" him. Later, he reneged on each of those decisions to give in to Moses' demands. But it was quite clear that those "actions" were accelerating, with each more radical than the one before it. And it was clear that some resolution would eventually need to occur – a resolution that would be acceptable both to the Israelites and to the Egyptians (even if the Egyptians didn't like the resolution).

The strategy followed to bring about resolution is found in the "action" that the people conduct. It is designed to get a reaction from those who are the focus of that action (in this case, Pharaoh). The effectiveness of that action is found in the reaction of the system. The task is to place a demand before the system or leader that requires a response. How that person or system reacts or responds determines the next step the organizing effort will take. Thus, in this case, each action was a plague. Once the plague occurred, the issue was how the Pharaoh would choose to respond. He responded by repenting and saying that he would let the people go. Based upon his reaction, Moses would act in good faith and lift the plague. The next appropriate (and moral) response would have been for the Pharaoh to set the Israelites free. But instead, his reaction to the end of the plague was to renege on his pledge (which indicated that he could not be trusted). That, in turn, created the grounds for the next action – another plague!

The objective of any action is an exchange of power. That is, any action that is designed to reorganize the status quo results in an exchange of power. Those holding unilateral power have something the people exercising relational power want. The objective is to get it. That is the exchange. It is redistribution of power because those holding the power recognize that it is in their self-interest to share some of that power. That was exactly the dynamic between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses wanted an exchange of power; he wanted Pharaoh to give up his legal and military hold over the Israelites, set them free and allow them to leave that country. Pharaoh finally came to the realization that his nation would be totally destroyed by Yahweh if he did not accede to Moses' demand. So he eventually acceded (as we will see); the exchange of power had then taken place. But that exchange of power occurred only after multiple and accumulating actions.

So, second, the battle between Pharaoh and Moses was more than a sibling rivalry. It was, as well, almost a classic battle between the forces of oppression and the forces of liberation, of dominating power and of relational power symbolized in the persons of Pharaoh and Moses. And it followed to the letter the classic principles of the exercise of people (or relational) power to bring about change in a powerful, tyrannical foe.

But the battle over whether Israel would be granted freedom was also a spiritual battle. For it was clearly and distinctly spiritual warfare that must clearly be recognized if one is to understand the depths of the story the Israelites told here (including the Passover).

The real battle being waged in the struggle between Pharaoh and Moses, Egypt and Israel, was actually between the god of the Egyptians, Amon-Re (personified in Pharaoh) and the God of Israel, Yahweh (symbolized in Moses). The Egyptians believed that the supreme ruler of their nation was the chief god of their pantheon, Amon-Re. And Pharaoh was the incarnate image of that god. Further, because all gods were territorial, Amon-Re was the ultimate monarch over Egypt, and no other god – whether he/she be a minor deity of Egypt or a major deity of some other country – had authority in Amon-Re's land except as granted by Amon-Re. Therefore, for Moses to defy and confront the Pharaoh was to declare that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, intended to battle the chief Egyptian god on Egyptian land which Amon-Re controlled and on which he was supposed to rule supreme. This was to be a battle of the gods to the death!

The arena for this battle was not simply Pharaoh's courtroom. The primary arena was the locus of the plagues. Each plague discredited a particular Egyptian minor deity (the frog, the sun, the Nile, etc.). In the plagues, Yahweh demonstrated sufficient power to turn the Egyptians' own gods against the Egyptian people, cause them great suffering, and demonstrate their lack of power against Yahweh. More than that, the plagues demonstrated that Amon-Re, with all his supposed power and might, was helpless against Yahweh who in essence ravaged Amon-Re's court (the minor deities). And Amon-Re stood helpless before him. Further, all this happened in Amon-Re's own land, in the very country of Egypt and to their own beloved Nile River. Amon-Re was helpless to defend his own country against the ravages of Yahweh! No wonder Pharaoh reneged when each plague was lifted; as the incarnate son of Amon-Re, he had to win back some respect and credibility for that established deity.

Nine plagues brought by Yahweh struck the Egyptians. Nine times the Pharaoh relented. Nine times, the plagues were lifted upon Moses' action. Nine times the Pharaoh reneged on his agreement and continued the confrontation. The determination of the Pharaoh, trying to salvage at least a minimum of respect for Amon-Re, rose with each confrontation. And the price for winning rose each time, until the plagues reached their climax.

When Pharaoh refused to release the people for the ninth time, Moses announced to Pharaoh the most horrible evil that could come upon the Egyptian people. "Thus says Yahweh: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the hand mill. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again" (11:4-6).

As Pharaoh listened to Moses' pronouncement of the consequences of Pharaoh's refusal to free the Israelites, he dismissed both Moses and Aaron, convinced that they had finally over-extended themselves. Now they had invaded the most sacred realm of Amon-Re. For Amon-Re was the god of life and death. He, and only he, could create life and take away life. No one else could. And in particular, since the Pharaoh's son was created by Amon-Re and who was every bit as much the human personification of Amon-Re as was he, the Pharaoh, he could die only at the will of Amon-Re, not at the behest of this mysterious desert deity, Yahweh. Moses had finally gone too far! It would be he, and not Pharaoh, that would be defeated come morning!

In preparation for the plague that was coming, Moses gave to the Israelites two instructions. First, they were to kill a young lamb, and were then to smear the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their house. In this way, as the angel of death moved throughout the land of Egypt, he would see the smeared blood, would know that there would be Israelites inside that house covered by that blood, and consequently would spare them from death. Second, with the lamb that the Israelites had killed to obtain its blood, they were to have a dinner together to celebrate how the angel of death had "passed over" their house and spared them. "This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly (so that you can depart this place in haste). It is the Passover of Yahweh" (12:11).

That feast, eaten in haste and in fear of the angel of death passing over their homes, would become a memorial held every year in every Hebrew home even to today, so that they would never forget how God had rescued them from bondage in Egypt through the "Passover"!

"At midnight Yahweh struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, 'Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship Yahweh, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone' (12:29-32a)!

With the completion of this final plague, the Israelites were released. And with the end of this plague, Yahweh's defeat of Amon-Re was complete. The ability of Yahweh to take the lives of those protected by Amon-Re indicated that Yahweh was the God who controlled life, nature and the universe. By defeating the god of the world's mightiest empire in the very land where that god supposedly ruled supreme, Yahweh proved himself the strongest God of the universe. In this act, the Israelites had broken the myth that each god ruled supreme in his own locality, and had established the foundation upon which a more adequate monotheism could later be developed.

The next day, a great host of Israelites assembled in Egypt. And with a shout, they began their exodus from that land. Moses led the march with his staff, while thousands upon thousands upon thousands of former slaves surged behind him. The land was filled from horizon to horizon with a great people marching forth – women carrying their babies, old men tottering along, the blind being led by their loved ones, children running happily along not understanding what was happening, lovers departing hand-in-hand, camels and donkeys and oxen groaning under the weight of the riches of Egypt poured upon them by a people who wished them only good riddance, thousands of sheep and goats being shepherded by barking dogs. Israel was free – free at least – free after 500 years of slavery – free to go back home to the Promised Land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses and his people had won! And Israel had won that day because God had indeed proved himself to be “Yahweh” – “I will cause to be what is caused to be”!

Psalm 149 is an unusual psalm. It is one of the collection of the five psalms that concludes the Psalter (Psalms 146-150). They all begin with the words, “Praise the Lord” and were likely used for the opening of a festive season in Israel. If so, this psalm would likely be the one used to begin Israel's ancient celebration of their new year which centered on the annual ceremony of the enthronement of God as King of the Universe (and before the Babylonian exile, the annual celebration of the enthronement of Israel's king as God's emissary on earth).

The psalm divides into three parts. Verses 1-3 summons Israel to praise, and thus to gather for the celebration of their new year and of God's enthronement. Verses 4-5 present reasons for praising God, and verses 6-9 calls Israel to national action in regards to all the other (non-Yahweh-believing) nations of the world.

That national action, of course, is what stuns the modern reader of the Psalm. “Let the high praises of God be in (Israel's) throats, and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgment decreed” (vss. 6-9a)! What the Psalmist is saying is that Israel's warriors should come forth from this annual celebration with God's praises on their lips and their sword in their hands, ready to go forth to conquer other nations! In other words, this is “holy war”!

Of course, this expresses more wishful thinking than actual capacity! This psalm was likely written at the time of or immediately following the Babylonian captivity, so the vanquished

Judah wasn't going to conquer anybody! But there is nothing like patriotism to keep one's hopes lifted!

The author of this psalm probably realizes the dangerous direction in which he is going, because he offers a corrective at the very end of the psalm. Psalm 149 concludes, "This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the Lord" (149b)! The Psalmist deftly turns the focus of action from Israel's warriors to the God of Israel. It is not so much that Israel's warriors will be God's vengeance upon the nations of the world as it is that God is a just God and in God's good time that the judgment here decreed will be enacted by God in God's own way. In this way, hope and confidence is kept alive among the Hebrew people, when they are surrounded by defeat and despair!

Although the last part of the psalm offends today's reader, the first part does have at least one lovely gem in it. Verse four states, "For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory". God takes pleasure in us! It is a great thought to realize that God rejoices in having created us. It is clear from the context that such pleasure does not come about because we are so attractive, faithful or obedient. The pleasure God takes in us is at God's initiative. God rewards us for being obedient to God's call to us (4b), but such obedience is not necessary as a pre-condition for his love. As parents rejoice in their infant child and love that child before that child has done anything to deserve such love, so God rejoices in us and loves us – not for what we do but for whom we are – God's child! God already loves us, and takes pleasure in us as an inevitable outcome of God's grace in action! Therefore, the Psalmist instructs us, "Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches" (vs. 5)!

Matthew 18:15-20 deals with the action that Jesus' community (here called "the church") should take to deal with one of its members who refuses to deal with his/her sin. But to fully appreciate this passage, we must examine it in the light of the previous statement by Jesus, his Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14).

Throughout Matthew 18, Jesus was presenting his call to the disciples to build his community ("the church") around the "little ones". He follows that call with his story of the lost sheep, as he continues his presentation on the "little ones" as being the center for the transforming work of the kingdom of God. Jesus realizes that the shalom community would not be embraced and brought about by the rich and powerful because they had too much invested in maintaining the present distribution of power. It will be realized by the marginalized, the peasants and the expendables – those whom Jesus calls "the little ones".

In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus addresses the question, "How important to God (and thus, to the kingdom of God) are the little ones?" His answer is that if one of them goes astray (that is, begins to embrace the systems of this world), the "shepherd" (that is, the church as well as himself) will leave the 99 "little ones" who embrace the shalom community, and go after the one. And when he is found and is convinced to re-embrace God's kingdom and is thus brought home, all 99 will rejoice. "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" (18:14).

Jesus is demonstrating that each “little one” is of such importance to God that Jesus himself will go out and search until that one who is being seduced away from the vision of the shalom community by the allure of the systems’ power and wealth will be found, convinced and returned. And therefore, that is how important each “little one” should be to the Church. For the eventual effectiveness of Jesus’ revolution will depend upon the commitment of these “little ones”.

It is in the light of this teaching about the insistence with which the church should seek the redemption of each “little one” that Jesus now asks the inevitable question: “But what if a little one refuses to return? What if the allure of the systems’ power and wealth is so great that one of Jesus’ followers refuses to return to his shalom community? What should you do then?”

What Jesus teaches the church should do in seeking to return one to the “fold” is remarkably similar to what Moses did in dealing with Pharaoh. You confront him or her! You do an “action” on the one who is being tempted away by the allures of “Egypt”. And the action is based on the principle that “the action is in the reaction”! How they choose to react to your intervention will determine the nature and severity of your next action. And this will continue until there is a significant exchange of power, whereby this person surrenders his or her attraction to the power, dominance and wealth of the systems in order to embrace the unity and trust and love of the shalom community.

What Jesus proposes is a steadily escalating series of confrontations. First, you go directly to the person and speak face-to-face with him or her. Notice that the burden of action does not lie upon the one doing wrong (“Pharaoh” or even the “little one” seduced by Pharaoh’s allure). The burden of action lies upon the one who has been repulsed or wronged or slighted by the one doing wrong. “If another member of the church *sins against you, you go* and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” (18:15). Thus, Moses went directly to Pharaoh, Jesus spoke directly to Peter, and we should to the “little one” (or even “great one”) who is rejecting the shalom community in favor of the supposed benefits of the Powers.

If the person refuses to repent, you are to then do a small, limited confrontation, adding two to three others whom this person would value to your team. If that doesn’t work, you escalate the confrontation to a public level, having a public meeting in which the “target” is faced squarely with his or her sin, the demand made for repentance and grace is extended (18:15b-17).

If the person still refuses to change his or her ways, then the church must take severe disciplining action against him. “If the offender still refuses to listen, even to the church (the public assembly), let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (vs. 17).

When most Christians read those words, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”, we interpret that as an exclusionary action, that the person should be put out of the church and shunned. However, that is not what Jesus meant. In the four Gospels, neither Gentiles nor tax collectors were excluded from Jesus’ shalom community; after all, Matthew himself (the author of this story) had been a tax-collector! In the New Testament, “Gentiles” and “tax collectors” were always looked upon as an object of mission! The task of the Christian community, given the expression of such unilateral commitment to the Roman and Jewish elite’s

priorities of greed, power and dominance on the part of a former disciple is to seek to win him or her back! He or she becomes a primary object of mission! The task is not to exclude, but to bend every effort to win back. If such is the response of the Good Shepherd (Matt. 18:10-14), then it should be the appropriate response of his followers, as well (Matt. 9:9-11; 11:19; 28:18-20). This person is now truly “targeted”!

Jesus’ shalom community is a gathering of people who have embraced Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God – of a society living in justice, equity, elimination of poverty and in unity and reconciliation with each other. This is life as God intended it to be, as Jesus came to bring into being through his own death and resurrection, and toward which we bend every effort to share in forming. If one from this community abandons it because he or she has been allured away by the unilateral power, greed or hunger for dominance of the world’s elite systems, our obligation is to become dogged in winning that person back. The very fact that he or she once embraced Jesus and Jesus’ community is an indication that there is an interest there in God’s intentions for the world. We must thus refuse to allow that interest to be stamped out, but will bend every effort to rekindle it and return that person in triumph to the fold. For “it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (vs. 14)!

The means to return such a stray to the fold is a series of actions, measured, temperate, but steadily escalating and all designed to lead to the targeted person’s redemption and restoration. If every action unhappily fails – no matter how patient and single-focused the church has been, then that person has chosen to abandon the church and its mission. But the church can never abandon him or her! The person may choose to give up on the church, but the church will never give up on him or her. And that is because this person is a brother or sister, “another member of the church”. This is the “tough love” with which we are to treat each other!

Jesus now follows this statement with an even more amazing teaching. “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you” (18:18-20).

This statement bears marked similarity to the one Jesus earlier made to Peter, when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah. In that earlier statement, Jesus had said to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (16:19). It is also quite similar to Jesus’ statement to the disciples after his resurrection, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23). What does Jesus mean by these stunning words?

First, he is clearly extending the mission he had given to Peter to the entire Christian community. Binding and loosing, forgiving and retaining is not simply Peter’s to do. Every follower of the Christ has this capacity and great responsibility laid upon him or her. In the light of the tenacity that Jesus has indicated is the responsibility of his followers, what Jesus is saying is that we are called to be people of action, people of confrontation. We are not to avoid it because it is

uncomfortable or difficult to do. Of course it is difficult to do. No one likes having to confront. But a person has to do what a person has to do!

What Jesus is saying is that it is our obligation to confront. It is our obligation to undertake, both alone and together with the larger Christian community, actions to return humanity to the shalom community. Humanity will not once again embrace God's society of justice, equity, elimination of poverty and living in unity and reconciliation with each other without being convinced to do so. It isn't going to just happen! It will take action in order to happen. It's going to take action on the part of Jesus (his willingness to be betrayed, to make his defense before the Jewish elite and Pilate, his scourging and finally, his death). And it's going to take action on our part. If we refuse to take such action, if we blanch at being confrontative and seek only the coward's way out – then we are condemning people to hell! We are condemning the elite and the powerful to the inevitable results of their injustice, greed and lust for power. We are condemning the “little ones” to a lifetime of being oppressed, exploited and dominated. And we are condemning those who have abandoned our fellowship for the allure of the systems never to be wooed back by our Savior. No action is actually an action to condemn. We have bound the people on earth and they will continue bound into heaven. We have retained the sins of people and their institutions, and those sins will be retained right into heaven. And all because we refuse to act!

But if we act, if we have the guts to take action, then “Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them”!

So Jesus gives a call to action to his followers! Sure, it will be hard! After all, it's going to cost Jesus his life! Nobody ever said that it would be easy – least of all, Jesus! But it is to the action of confrontation, of negotiation, of making demands, of working by any means for justice to which we as Jesus' shalom community are called.

It is in the light of this call to action that Jesus then says, “Truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” This is not a carte blanche, implying that God is nothing more than a Santa Claus who will happily give us everything that we ask for. God is no Sugar Daddy! What Jesus is saying here is that if we, as God's shalom community, are agreed on the action we must take to “let the people go”, then Jesus promises us that God will bless that effort. We will most often succeed in such actions. We may occasionally fail – but that failure will be more apparent than real, because everyone standing up for the right, simply by doing so, has become liberated in a profound way so that they can never be totally repressed again. They have tasted freedom, and that can never be taken away from them. Therefore, Jesus can promise with assurance that any action we take for justice, equity or reconciliation will – in one way or another – be accomplished for “it will be done for you by my Father in heaven”.

Therefore, Jesus concludes, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (vs. 20). Where two or three are gathered into a shalom community, there Jesus will be. And if Jesus is there, then that group of two or three has become God's intentional community – a body of people who can determine the actions they need to take against the principalities and powers of their city, in support of the “little ones” of their community, or even to seek to woo

back those who have been seduced by the false promises of the elite – and God will make them successful in working for Christ and for Christ’s kingdom!

Romans 13:8-14 summarizes the ethics of the church that comes out of embracing the grace of God.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (13:8-10).

The acting out of Christian faith, both as individuals and as a corporate body, is as simple as that. “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Paul does an intriguing play on words in this text. By stating “owe no one anything”, he is referring to two kinds of obligations: the debt of taxes and the debt of money owed to another. But there is a third obligation – and that is the debt of love. You should pay your taxes as a citizen of a given society, he is suggesting. You should also pay the financial debts you owe people, because that is the moral as well as fiscally-prudent thing to do. So you should be debt-free with both taxes and personal financial obligations all paid up. But the one debt you can never pay off is the debt of love – for this is an ongoing debt that you – as a Christ-one -- owe to everyone.

The Greek word that Paul uses for “love” here is the word *agape*. The Greeks had three words that we translate into English as “love”. There is *phileo* or “friendship, brotherly love”. There is *eros* or sexual and passionate love. And then there is *agape*. *Agape* is an intriguing word. It is often used to refer to God’s love for us, a love that is acted out in God’s mercy and grace toward us. Likewise, *agape* is used to refer to our love for God and of our acting out God’s love toward one another. The word refers to the will rather than to the emotions, and is an active word in that it is love in action. Thus, *agape* is our ongoing debt that we Christians pay toward each other and toward the world. That is the word that Paul is using here that is translated into the English word, “love”.

If you live in *agape* toward each other, and are consequently acting responsibly toward each other, that means that you will act in ways that will live out the commandments. You cannot authentically love God and your neighbor without expressing that love through your actions. And chief among these will be that you will not commit adultery, do no murder, do not steal and do not covet. If one truly loves one’s neighbor, then, *ipso facto*, one is keeping the Law of God.

Fulfilling the Law through love was beautifully put by Chrysostom (344-407), when he wrote, “Love is a debt which you owe to your brother because of your spiritual relationship to him. If love departs from us, the whole body is torn in pieces. Therefore love your brother, for if you can fulfill the law by befriending him, then the benefit you receive puts you in his debt”.¹

¹ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 23.

Paul continues, “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (13:11-14).

Paul takes his argument one step further. He has previously argued that one keeps the commandments and is motivated to do the good by living out the *agape* love given to one (or to an entire community) because of the *agape* and grace of God. In this passage, Paul adds another motivation for living Christ-like lives toward the world: the coming of the approaching “Day of the Lord”. First-century Christians believed that the Risen Jesus would be returning very soon to claim his throne and to act out the fulfillment of the Messiah as conquering hero. Thus, Paul argues in this passage, “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers” because we are that much closer to the date when Christ will return in all his glory. Because “the night is far gone and the day is near”, we should certainly be living out a Christian life style by being engaged fully as Christ-ones in both our public and private life. In this way, when Jesus does return, he will find us deporting ourselves in ways that will make him proud of us, for he will see that we are living out our faith through our public and private actions! This would surely be *agape* in action!

This scripture ends with a passage that has become world-famous because of the strategic role it played in the conversion of one of Christianity’s greatest saints. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa and a voluminous writer of theology, biblical exegesis, church polity and philosophy. His major work, *City of God*, set the tone of theological thinking for the next thousand years as he described the mission of the church as working for the redemption and transformation of the human city by holding up to it the vision of God’s intentions for the world, the “city of God”. He is rightly considered the most influential theologian in the history of Christianity, next to St. Paul.

Although Augustine grew up in a Christian home, he rejected Christianity as a young man and pursued both other popular philosophies of his day and a very dissolute life style. In his unique book chronicling his spiritual journey, *The Confessions*, Augustine shared how he had often been convicted about Christianity but loved his sybaritic lifestyle too much to convert. Rather, he prayed, “Give me chastity and continency, only not yet!” But then, one day, Augustine and his friend Alypius were sitting in a garden and discussing their mutual indecision when Augustine suddenly heard a child’s voice singing, “Take up and read; take up and read”. He looked around him and saw a scroll of the book of Romans lying on a bench. He sat down on the bench, picked up the scroll and began to read the first words on which his eyes first fell. But let him complete the story.

“I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell. (And this is what I read:) ‘Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering² and wantonness, not in strife and

² The early English translation of Romans 13:13-14 uses some now archaic words such as “chambering” (i.e., “debauchery”), “wantonness” (i.e., “licentiousness”) and “concupiscence” (i.e., “gratifying fleshy desires”).

envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence’.

“No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.

“Then putting my finger between, I shut the volume, and with a calmed countenance made it known to Alypius. And without any turbulent delay, he joined me. Thence we go in to my mother; we tell her; she rejoiceth; we relate in order how it took place; she leaps for joy, and blesses Thee! For Thou convertedst me unto Thyself. And Thou didst convert her mourning into joy.”³

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³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Edward B. Pusey (written c. 401 AD; published by Pocket Books, New York, 1951), pp. 147-148.